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Suddenly (1954 film)

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Suddenly is a 1954 American film noir[1] thriller directed by Lewis Allen with a screenplay written by Richard Sale. The drama features Frank Sinatra, Sterling Hayden, James Gleason and Nancy Gates, among others.[2]

The tranquility of a small town is jarred when the U.S. President is scheduled to pass through and a hired assassin takes over the Benson home as a perfect location to ambush the president.

The film is among the films in the public domain.

Suddenly

Theater release poster

Directed by	Lewis Allen
Produced by	Robert Bassler
Screenplay by	Richard Sale
Starring	Frank Sinatra Sterling Hayden James Gleason Nancy Gates Kim Charney Christopher Dark
Music by	David Raksin
Cinematography	Charles G. Clarke
Edited by	John F. Schreyer
Distributed by	United Artists
Release date(s)	October 7, 1954 (United States)
Running time	75 minutes
Country	United States
Language	English

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Plot [edit]

In post-war America, the President of the United States is scheduled to journey through the small town of Suddenly, California. Claiming to be checking up on security prior to his arrival, a group of FBI agents arrive at the home of the Bensons, on top of a hill that looks down upon the station where the Presidential train is due to stop. However, they soon turn out to be assassins led by the ruthless John Baron (Frank Sinatra), who take over the house and hold the family hostage.

Sheriff Tod Shaw (Sterling Hayden) arrives with Dan Carney (Willis Bouchey), a Secret Service agent in charge of the President's security detail. When he does, Baron and his gangsters shoot Carney and a bullet fractures Shaw's arm.

Baron sends one of his two henchmen to double-check on the President's schedule but he is killed in a shootout with the police. Jud (James O'Hara), a television repairman, shows up at the house and also becomes a hostage. Pidge (Kim Charney) goes to his grandfather's dresser to fetch some medication and notices a fully loaded revolver which he replaces with his toy cap gun.

Baron is confronted by the sheriff on the risks and meaning of killing the President and Baron's remaining henchman begins showing some reluctance. For Baron, however, these are the very least of his concerns and it soon becomes clear that he is a psychopath whose pleasure comes from killing – who and why he kills being the least of his problems.

A sniper's rifle has been mounted on a metal table by a window. Jud discreetly hooks the table up to the 5000 volt plate output of the family television. Pop Benson (James Gleason) then spills a cup of water on the floor beneath the table. Although the hope is that Baron will be shocked to death, his remaining henchman touches the table first and is electrocuted, firing the rifle repeatedly and attracting the attention of police at the train station as he struggles to free himself. Baron shoots Jud, disconnects the electrical hookup and aims the rifle as the president's train arrives at the station, but to his surprise, doesn't stop (having been alerted to the risk). Ellen Benson (Nancy Gates) shoots Baron in the chest and Shaw shoots him again. Baron's last words are, "Don't... please."

Cast [edit]

- Frank Sinatra as John Baron
- Sterling Hayden as Sheriff Tod Shaw
- James Gleason as Peter "Pop" Benson
- Nancy Gates as Ellen Benson
- Kim Charney as Peter Benson III (Pidge)
- Paul Frees as Benny Conklin, Baron's Accomplice (also TV announcer voice)
- Christopher Dark as Bart Wheeler
- Willis Bouchey as Dan Carney, Chief Secret Service Agent
- Paul Wexler as Deputy Slim Adams
- James O'Hara as Jud Kelly
- Kem Dibbs as Wilson
- Clark Howat as Haggerty
- Charles Smith as Bebop
- Dan White as Desk Officer Burg

Reception [edit]

Critical response [edit]

Sterling Hayden as Sheriff Tod Shaw

When the film was released, *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther, liked the direction of the film and the acting, writing, "Yet such is the role that Mr. Sinatra plays in *Suddenly!*, a taut little melodrama that... [it] shapes up as one of the slickest recent items in the minor movie league... we have several people to thank- particularly Richard Sale for a good script, which tells a straight story credibly, Mr. Allen for direction that makes both excitement and sense, Mr. Bassler for a production that gets the feel of a small town and the cast which includes Sterling Hayden, James Gleason and Nancy Gates." Crowther especially liked Sinatra's performance. He wrote, "Mr. Sinatra deserves a special chunk of praise...In *Suddenly!* he proves it in a melodramatic *tour de force*."[3]

The staff at *Variety* magazine also gave the film a good review and praised the acting. They wrote, "Thesp inserts plenty of menace into a psycho character, never too heavily done, and gets good backing from his costar, Sterling Hayden, as sheriff, in a less showy role but just as authoritatively handled. Lewis Allen's direction manages a smart piece where static treatment easily could have prevailed."[4]

Film critic Carl Mazek makes the case that the "Machiavellian attitude" of John Baron links the picture with the brutal films noir of the 1950s like *The Big Night* (1951) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). Moreover, the themes of violence, sense of claustrophobia and despair mark the film as completely amoral, and, as such, *Suddenly* is quite opposite of non-noir films like *The Desperate Hours* (1955).[5]

History [edit]

Influence [edit]

John Baron berates a hostage

In 1959, five years after the release of *Suddenly,* a novel was published which had a remarkably similar ending. This was *The Manchurian Candidate* written by Richard Condon, a former Hollywood press agent recently turned novelist. His book also features a mentally troubled former war hero who, at the climax, uses a rifle with scope to shoot at a presidential candidate.

A remake of the film, starring Dominic Purcell and directed by Uwe Boll, was released in 2013.[6]

The Manchurian Candidate was released as *a film in 1962*, again starring Sinatra, but this time out to prevent an assassination being committed by Laurence Harvey.

Lost of copyright [edit]

The film's copyright was not renewed and it fell into the public domain; it can be downloaded and viewed for free online.[7]

The film is widely available from a number of discount/public domain distributors. *Suddenly* was colorized for home

video by Hal Roach Studios in 1986, rendering Sinatra's blue eyes brown.[8] A remastered colorized version by Legend Films was released to DVD on June 16, 2009, which also includes a newly restored print of the original black & white film.[9]

See also [edit]

- Assassinations in fiction
- List of films featuring home invasions

References [edit]

Notes [edit]

1. ^ Selby 1984, p. 184.
2. ^ *Suddenly* at the American Film Institute Catalog.
3. ^ Crowther, Bosley. "Film review: Suddenly". *The New York Times*, October 8, 1954.
4. ^ *Variety* , film review, *Suddenly*, January 1, 1954.
5. ^ Silver and Ward 1982, p. 275.
6. ^ *Suddenly (2013)* at the Internet Movie Database
7. ^ *Suddenly* on Internet Archive.Retrieved on 2013-11-24.
8. ^ *Suddenly* at AllMovie.
9. ^ Amazon.com

Bibliography [edit]

- Selby, Spencer. *Dark City: The Film Noir*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland Publishing, 1984. ISBN 0-89950-103-6.
- Silver, Alain, and Elizabeth Ward, eds. *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style.* Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 3rd edition, 1992. ISBN 0-87951-479-5.

External links [edit]

- *Suddenly* at the American Film Institute Catalog
- *Suddenly* at the Internet Movie Database
- *Suddenly* on YouTube
- *Suddenly* at AllMovie
- *Suddenly* at the TCM Movie Database
- *Suddenly* is available for free download at the Internet Archive [*more*]

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